

## Donor Decision-Making, Motivations, and Meaning-Making in the Context of A Historic Fashion and Textiles Museum on A University Campus: A Case Study

Brooklyn Benjamin and Jennifer Paff

Colorado State University

**Keywords:** donor decision-making, fashion and textiles museum, motivation, case study

Many university-based fashion and textile museums in the United States began as teaching collections for textiles courses in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and continue to rely on object donations to satisfy university and museum missions (Welters & Ordoñez, 2011). Despite the importance of object donations to historic fashion and textiles collections/museums housed on university campuses (Welters & Ordoñez, 2011), very little academic attention has been given to exploring perspectives of donors to such collections/ museums (Marcketti, et al., 2011; Welters & Ordoñez, 2011; Szczepanski, 2017). Specifically, very little is known about the activities of individual donors who shape collections passively (i.e., voluntarily) and incrementally, as in instances where a donor initiates single item or small quantity donations. To contribute to the lack of literature considering individual object donor perspectives, we undertook the present case study to explore the behaviors and experiences – including decision-making, motivations, and meaning-making – of object donors to the XXX Museum, one of the premiere university historic fashion and textiles collections in the country (The Collection, 2022). Given the dearth of literature about donations to museums, to inform this research, we looked to prior work on charitable giving (i.e., of objects and money) (e.g., Guy & Patton, 1989; Sargeant, 2014). Our research also was guided by Belk’s (1988) work on the extended self and the extended object, which suggests that donations to museums may reflect expressions of self and identity.

We adopted an exploratory, qualitative case study methodology. In-depth (face-to-face or virtual) interviews were collected from 13 donors who had made an individual, passive donation of 10 or fewer objects to the XXX Museum. Participants ranged in age from 42 to 84 years (mean =71.4 years), identified as either male ( $n=2$ ) or female ( $n=11$ ), and identified as White. Several participants had ties to the university housing the XXX Museum; 4 participants were previous or current XXX Museum volunteers. During each interview, the primary researcher pulled the objects donated by the participant to the XXX Museum so that they could be used to guide the interview conversation and prompt the participant’s memories. Data were transcribed verbatim and were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

The major contribution of this study is a grounded theory model illuminating the *Decision-Making process to Donate Objects* to a university historic fashion and textiles museum. Here, the components of the model – and the relationships among them -- are described.

Participants’ decision to donate an object to the XXX Museum began with a simultaneous consideration of the object’s utility (i.e., *Evaluation of Object Utility*) and options for divesting the self of the object (i.e., *Considering Divestment Options*). As participants considered their divestment options, the decision to donate an object to the XXX Museum was impacted by four factors: participants’ recognition of the XXX Museum as a divestment option (i.e., *Awareness of*

*the Museum*), participants' inclination to support charitable organizations through donation (i.e., *P propensity for Donation*), various supports to donation (i.e., *Reinforcements to Donation*), and various obstacles to donation (i.e., *Barriers to Donation*). For many participants, the decision to donate their object was reinforced by the lack of an apparent beneficiary who might be interested in inheriting the object. Other participants perceived that their object lacked purpose in their personal custody, but felt the object could achieve greater utility, purpose, or meaning via donation to the museum by increasing the "visibility" of the object. Barriers to donation included questioning the value of their object to others and/or having an emotional/sentimental attachment to the object.

Participants' *Motives for Donation* influenced the move from *Considering Divestment Options* to the *Donation Decision*. Among participants, eight motives were identified: donations motivated by a connection to a place or a person (i.e., *Relational Motivations*); donations enacted to accrue practical benefits (i.e., *Pragmatic Motivations*); donations made in memory of a loved one (i.e., *Familial or Memorial Motivations*); donations enacted for catharsis or release of pressure (i.e., *Psychological Motivations*); donations motivated by the care and wellbeing of the object (i.e., *Custodial Motivations*); donations motivated by the museum's ability to use the object to educate and impact others (i.e., *Educational Motivations*); donations given where the gift made the most significant impact (i.e., *Consequential Motivations*); and motivations related to doing the right thing (i.e., *Altruistic Motivations*), which most often overlapped with educational, custodial, and familial motivations.

After navigating the various components of the decision-making process to ultimately donate their object to the Museum, participants experienced a variety of other outcomes (*Other Outcomes*) related to the donation decision process, including positive emotions, writing projects, and dreams.

Participants varied in terms of *Post Donation Museum Interaction*. A few participants continued their donation relationships with the Museum by enacting further donations, whereas a small portion of the sample had no post-donation interaction with the Museum; other participants reported developing donation relationships with other institutions. Some participants formed post-donation volunteer relationships with the Museum. In a few instances, the participants-turned-volunteers directly influenced peers to consider donating their objects to the Museum, increasing the awareness of the museum within their social circles and suggesting a potential relationship between *Post Donation Museum Interaction* and *Awareness of the Museum*. Participants varied in how and when they experienced meaning and identity (*Meaning*) throughout the donation decision process; some participants felt the entire process was good preparation for "saying goodbye" to the object. Other participants found the donation decision process meaningful through the gratification they received after donation, knowing the object had a permanent and safe home where the story of the objects would be "understood and recorded." Aspects of identity and the self were apparent in the *Donation Decision Process* in ways the participants discussed their previous relationships with their objects, how the objects contributed to the management of personal and professional identities, and how the objects served as "touchstones of childhood" to retrieve and store memories. By donating these objects to the Museum, participants further extended their notions of identity connected to their objects and allowed their stories to be recorded in public history via the Museum.

This work contributes to the museum and charitable giving literature by illuminating the

decision-making process of donors who passively donated objects to a historic fashion and textiles museum on a university campus. Unique to the decision-making model developed for the present study are the incorporation of the meaning of the object to the overall decision-making process and the identification of motives specific to the donation of historic fashion and textiles objects (e.g., pragmatic, custodial, and educational motives). The work also highlights the way in which participants extended their sense of self and identity through object donations to the Museum, building on Belk's work on the extended self and object (1988). In the future, it will be important to explore experiences of donors to diverse types of historic fashion and textiles museums (e.g., those not housed on a university campus) to understand how their decision-making processes may be similar or different from those of participants in the present study.

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